History of Various Siding Types Used on Fairbury Homes

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The various types of materials used for the exterior of houses in the Fairbury area have evolved significantly since Valentine and Rachel Darnall built their first log cabin south of Fairbury in 1830. Pioneer settlers used logs from timber growing along Indian Creek or the Vermilion River to build their log cabins.

The Peoria & Oquawka Railroad laid its tracks from Peoria to the Indiana border in 1857, marking the founding of the village of Fairbury. Once the railroads were in place, house-building materials could be brought to Fairbury and sold through local lumberyards.

Between the Darnalls settling in 1830 and the first railroad in 1857, sawmills were installed in the Fairbury area at some point. The sawmills were either water-powered or horse-powered. The most common design for horses powering sawmills was known as "sweep power" or "horse wheel," where one or more horses walked in a circular path, turning a central shaft that provided rotary power to the sawmill.

Once sawmills could make wooden boards, pioneer settlers quickly replaced their log cabins with wood-framed houses. Sawmills quickly developed that could saw logs at a taper, creating horizontal, tapered clapboard siding. This early clapboard was about five inches tall, with the bottom of the board being about three-quarters of an inch thick and the top about a quarter inch thick.

Both the historic 1854 Strevell House and the 1858 Jones House in Pontiac used beveled wood siding for their exterior. Many of the siding boards on the Strevell House are still the original 1854 boards, with some being replaced over the years. The bottom row of siding boards tends to rot because rainwater bounces back up from the ground, exposing them to more moisture. Recent replacement of these rotted boards used new cedar beveled siding boards purchased from Menard's Special Orders system. The new boards are dimensionally identical to the original 1854 boards.

Another option in this era was to nail boards vertically to the frame and butt the boards together. These boards were cut from local trees, and early sawmills produced them up to 12 inches wide and one inch thick. The cracks between the boards were filled with chinking materials. The pioneer settlers borrowed the approach they had used in constructing their log cabins, where mud, straw, and sometimes animal hair were used to fill the log joints.

With the advent of more economical lumber after the railroad arrived in 1857, the vertical board approach was modified to become the board-and-batten siding method. A narrower board was nailed over each of the vertical joints to seal the structure much better than the chinking method. This method revealed a visual pattern of repeating batten boards when viewed from the exterior. The board and batten method was used to build many outlying buildings on Fairbury area farms.

Log cabins and then framed houses used cedar shingles made of wood until asphalt shingles replaced them in the 1910s and 1920s. A few homes in the Fairbury area likely used cedar shingles as a vertical siding method on their framed homes.

One potential problem with using wood-based siding on a wood-framed house is the risk of the house burning down, as wood is a highly combustible material. Some early commercial buildings in Fairbury utilized locally made bricks to minimize the risk of fire. After the railroad came through in 1857, bricks for building houses could have been transported by the railroad. The Thomas A. Beach House, located on East Hickory Street, is a brick home built in 1872. Those bricks were likely brought to Fairbury by the railroad. This house is often referred to as the "Lion House" due to the two concrete lions located in the front yard. Brick exterior walls have been used for dwellings up to the present day. The initial cost to build brick houses is higher than that of other exterior siding materials.

From 1857 until the 1930s, most homes in the Fairbury area were predominantly wood beveled siding, with the remainder being brick. In the 1930s, asphalt shingles, similar to roofing shingles, were used on exterior vertical walls of some Fairbury homes. Before it was remodeled, the house at the northeast corner of First and Hickory Streets had light brown-colored asphalt shingles as its exterior siding.

After World War II ended, there was a tremendous need to build more residential housing and to build it as quickly as possible. Carl Strandlund conceived the idea of addressing the housing shortage by manufacturing low-cost homes that utilized steel panels with a porcelain coating. He applied for and received a patent for his concept. He named his new houses Lustron homes.

Around 1947, two Lustron homes were built in Fairbury. One still stands and is on Hickory Street just east of the Beach House. The other Lustron home was constructed at 409 West Pine Street. This home on Pine Street no longer stands because a couple of years ago, it was carefully dismantled, and the parts were saved by someone who restores Lustron homes. Because the price of these homes was significantly higher than that of conventional "stick-built" wood-frame homes, the company quickly went out of business.

Aluminum siding was first introduced as a residential exterior siding method after World War II. Aluminum reduced the need to repaint wood siding every 10 years to keep it from rotting. After many years, the paint on aluminum siding often fades, but it can be repainted successfully. Aluminum siding was vulnerable to permanent denting, such as from a hail storm. Many houses were built in Fairbury in this era with aluminum siding.

Starting in the early 1970s, grooved plywood became very popular for exterior siding on new houses built in Fairbury. Lumberyards referred to this material as T1-11 plywood siding. It has grooves every four or eight inches and has a rough texture. It gained popularity due to its rustic appearance, affordability, and ease of installation. Many existing homes in Fairbury have this grooved siding, and as long as it is periodically repainted, it will last for many decades. The North Park screened-in pavilion, finished in 1998, utilized T1-11 siding. The Marsh Park screened-in pavilion, completed in 2017, also features T1-11 plywood siding.

Also during the 1970s, vinyl siding was introduced and began to be used in the construction of new Fairbury homes. Vinyl siding has also been used to replace or cover beveled wood siding on older homes. It is very economical and easy to install. It does not require periodic repainting.

Some homes built in the last 20 years use a combination of stacked rock and vinyl siding to give a pleasing architectural exterior view of the home. Many also use a combination of brick and vinyl siding to achieve a visually appealing appearance. During the last couple of decades, other exterior siding options, including fiber cement, engineered wood, and metal siding, have become available for

residential construction. These newer options have not been widely adopted in the construction of new Fairbury homes.

Since Valentine and Rachel Darnall first settled south of Fairbury in their log cabin in 1830, there has been a gradual trend away from local materials, such as wood, to man-made materials, including vinyl siding and factory-made bricks. The factors of initial cost, maintenance costs, and longevity drove these changes. We may see more changes in the materials used for external residential siding in the coming decades.

A typical 1970s home using a combination of brick and T1-11 plywood grooved siding. Many homes in Fairbury were built in the 1970s using the T1-11 plywood siding.